

Social Dialogue over Vocational Education and Training in Europe

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A European-wide survey on social dialogue over vocational education and training demonstrated that the social partners have a formal role in VET policy making in all the countries covered and are involved in the implementation of VET actions, particularly at sector and local levels. While the structures of participation vary according to the degree of state regulation and the locus of training, social partner involvement is extensive irrespective of the nature of the regulatory framework and is likely to increase.

Key words: Training, Learning, Education

Problem statement

The research was contracted by CEDEFOP (*Centre Européen de Développement de Formation Professionnelle*), the European Commission's agency for development of vocational education and training (VET), to analyse the nature and extent of 'social dialogue' over VET in Europe. The problem is how to encourage more effective social dialogue when arrangements for VET and social dialogue differ between EU Member States.

Social dialogue refers to meetings between the social partners: institutions representing employers (private and public) and employees, which, as distinct from negotiation and consultation in the employment relations field, are convened at the invitation of the state, or supra-state, in order to inform and modify policy. At the European level, social dialogue refers to meetings and negotiations between the social partners as defined in Article 118b of the EC Treaty: 'The Commission shall endeavour to develop the dialogue between management and labour at European level, which could, if the two sides consider it desirable, lead to relations based on agreement.' Three social partner representative organisations are involved: ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation, or *Confédération Européenne des Syndicats*), UNICE/UEAPME (*Union des Industries de la Communauté Européenne/Union Européenne des Ateliers et Petites Moyennes Entreprises*) and CEEP (*Centre Européen de l'Entreprise Publique*). An analysis of the development of social dialogue at EU level is provided by Dølvic (1999) and in relation to employment and HRD in member states by Winterton & Strandberg (2004).

Social dialogue is widely viewed as critical for the success of VET, both initial vocational training (IVT) and continuing vocational training (CVT), especially where the social partners are involved in the identification of training needs, curricula and content of training (Finlay & Niven 1996). Equally, VET is made more legitimate and relevant to the needs of industry, reducing the gap between training providers, especially in the formal state education system, and end users in the world of work. Social dialogue is further necessitated by industrial restructuring, new technologies and increasing dependence upon intellectual capital within enterprises. Attempts to promote workforce flexibility and adaptability have stimulated experiential workplace development, which, along with the EU lifelong learning strategy, has brought a new recognition of the importance of tacit skills and informal routes of acquisition (Bjørnåvold 2000). Recognising these issues, the European Commission (EC) emphasised:

Social dialogue and the process of reaching agreement between the social partners at the European level – particularly in the area of vocational training – should form a major component of this community co-operation. Consultation with and between the partners on access to skills has already been advocated in the 1997 *Report on Access to Continuing Training*. Community activity will provide support to the dialogue between and with the social partners (EC 1997).

In February 2002, the social partners agreed the *Framework of Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competencies and Qualifications*, increasing their role in HRD initiatives and establishing mechanisms for annual monitoring and evaluation across the EU. To support these initiatives, in line with the objectives of the Lisbon (2000) summit, CEDEFOP surveyed existing social dialogue over VET in European countries and commissioned an analysis that was disseminated to encourage transfer of good practice (Winterton 2003).

Theoretical framework

The extent to which the social partners have been involved in determining training policy and practice has been analysed in several reports produced by the Commission or its agencies (Aga 1998; Blanpain, Engels & Pellegrini 1994; Gierorgica & Luttringer 1997; Theunissen 1996). These analyses reveal that experience from EU countries does not converge towards a clearly defined role for the social partners (Halvorsen 1998). Given the importance of involving the social partners in VET, a major challenge for developing EU policy to promote social dialogue is the diversity of VET systems in member states, since national VET systems impose constraints on social dialogue. To take these into account a typology of VET systems has been proposed in terms of the *locus* (workplace or school) and *regulation* (state or market) of VET, which differentiate the four largest EU member states: France, Germany, Italy and the UK (Winterton 1998). In terms of its locus, VET is mostly industry-led and centred on the workplace in the UK and Germany, whereas training is education-led and centred on school in Italy and France. Whereas VET is regulated by the state in Germany and France, in the UK and Italy arrangements are market-led, with responsibility for training largely devolved to employers (Winterton 2000).

In analysing the CEDEFOP survey, the locus and regulation of VET were considered as explanatory variables, to identify the optimum arrangements for securing effective social partner involvement and exploring the scope for transfer of good practice across different national VET systems and traditions.

Research questions

The following research questions were formulated in discussion with CEDEFOP:

1. To what extent and in what ways are the social partners involved in VET policy making?
2. To what extent and in what ways are the social partners involved in VET implementation?
3. To what extent and in what ways are the social partners involved in initiatives to promote lifelong learning and encourage the take-up of learning opportunities?
4. What explains variations in the extent of social dialogue over VET?

Methodology

The main research instrument was a questionnaire designed by staff on secondment to CEDEFOP and administered as a mail survey (followed by telephone and email) of all EU Member States between January 2002 and February 2003. The survey was distributed to the CEDEFOP Refernet national consortium leader in each country and completed either by someone in that organisation or passed to another organisation in that country. The national coordinators of the Refernet VET information and research network, listed on the CEDEFOP web site (<http://www.cedefop.eu.int/directory.asp?refernet>), largely comprise representatives of the Ministries of Education or state-sponsored agencies responsible for VET. The CEDEFOP survey was comprehensive in scope, dealing with the legal framework and formal representation structures concerned with establishing education and training policy as well as social partner participation in education and training activities, from vocational schools to training systems and on-the-job training, both initial and continuing. The survey was supplemented by a review of relevant literature and discussions with the social partners at European level to validate the findings, some of which we challenged (see Winterton 2003: Appendix 1).

By February 2003, when the analysis began, returns had been received from 14 countries, (11 of the then 15 EU member states and 2 EFTA countries: Norway and Iceland), excluding Greece, Italy and Luxembourg within the EU15. There were two very comprehensive returns from Belgium (Flemish-speaking and French), which happily exhibit a high degree of concordance. The Swedish report was a fairly comprehensive account of social dialogue on training but was not structured around the survey questions, so was not included. Nevertheless, with the incorporation of information from other sources, the study offers a reasonably comprehensive analysis, building on Heidemann *et al* (1994).

The findings from the research are summarised below under the three areas relating to the first three research questions established above. The fourth question is addressed in the conclusions.

Results and findings

Social partner involvement in VET policy making

In reviewing policies on lifelong learning in Europe, Heidemann (2002) noted that while governments generally define the framework, they invariably 'expect the social partners to be involved in fleshing out the framework provided.' The CEDEFOP survey confirmed this view, demonstrating that the social partners have a formal role in VET policy making in all the European countries covered by the survey. In all cases this role includes representation at national level; in the majority of cases also at sectoral level; and in many cases also at regional and local (enterprise or establishment) level.

In those countries with a tradition of state regulation, social partner representation is determined by legislation, as is the case in 9 of the countries involved in the survey. In Germany, social partner involvement is legally defined in The Vocational Training Promotion Law (*Berufsbildungsförderungsgesetz 1981*), which regulates the responsibilities of the bodies involved in determining VET policy at the national level. The Vocational Training Law (*Berufsbildungsgesetz 1969*) defines the responsibilities of the 16 regional state committees for VET (*Ländersausschüsse für Berufsbildung*) and the Chambers (*Berufsbildungsausschüsse der zuständigen Stellen*). The Social Law III (*Sozialgesetzbuch III 1997*) defines shared responsibility for employment and labour market programmes, including training, continuing training and re-training. The main board of the national level Federal Institute for Vocational Training (*Bundesinstituts für Berufsbildung, BIBB*), its Standing Committee (*Ständiger Ausschuss*) and the Joint Committee of the Federal States (*Ländersausschüsse*) comprise representatives of central government, employers and trade unions, plus representatives of the Federal States (*Länder*). In France, the involvement of the social partners in VET policy making is defined in various articles of the Labour Code, notably Book IX, Article 910-1. The social partners meet the authorities at national level to discuss VET issues in the National Council for Vocational Training, Social Advancement and Employment (*Conseil national pour la formation professionnelle, le progrès social et l'emploi*). Trade unions are not formally consulted before laws are drafted, but virtually all legislation pertaining to VET is approved in inter-occupational agreements prior to adoption. In Belgium the Law of 24 May 1921 gives employers and employees the opportunity to defend their occupational rights, including the right to VET, while the Law of 29 May 1952 created the National Labour Council (*Nationale Arbeidsraad – NAR* or *Conseil National du Travail – CNT*), a joint body comprising an equal number of inter-occupational employee and employer association representatives. In Iceland, the new Upper Secondary School Act, No. 80/1996 sets out the policy in vocational training affairs. Chapter IX of the Act makes a detailed provision for the roles and responsibilities of both sides of industry, through a central Cooperation Committee for Vocational Study and Occupational Councils (*Starfsgreinaráð*).

In countries with a tradition of voluntarism, notably the UK and Ireland, historically the law has been much less prescriptive concerning social partner involvement in VET policy. Heidemann *et al* (1994: 11) commented on the 'almost total absence of social dialogue' over VET in the UK, yet in both countries the social partners play a major role in VET policy. In Ireland the *Labour Services Act 1987* defines social partner involvement in developing national VET policy. Vocational training policy is established at national level by two tripartite bodies: the Training and Employment Authority (FÁS) and the State Tourism Training Agency. In the UK, the focus was on sectoral Industry Training Boards, established as statutory tripartite bodies under the *Industrial Training Act 1964*, but these were replaced during the 1980s by a market-led system in which the employers played the dominant role (Hyman 1992; Rainbird 1990; Senker 1992). Even with these changes, there was extensive social partner involvement in sector-level training arrangements, although no longer on a statutory footing, even in sectors where union membership had virtually collapsed (Winterton & Winterton 1994) and since the return of Labour government in 1997, the unions have played a major role in VET.

The Netherlands, with the socio-economic 'poldermodel', can be seen as a hybrid between the state regulated social dialogue 'Rijnlands model' and free market voluntarism, typified by the 'Anglo-Saxon model'. The poldermodel involves intensive and elaborate negotiation between the government and the social partners, resulting in wage restraint and employment growth. In the 1980s, the social partners increased the level and scope of negotiations on employability and training and this resulted in the 'Wassenaar treaty' (*Akkoord van Wassenaar 1982*) which is generally seen as a positive turning point in the development of the economy. The Vocational and Adult Education Act (*Wet Educatie en Beroepsopvoeding*) defines the various ways of formal communication and involvement of relevant actors at central, institutional level and at the level of the national bodies. Moreover, the social partners are formally represented on the boards of the national vocational education bodies.

Social partner involvement in VET implementation

Citing research undertaken on behalf of the ETUC, Heidemann (2002) concluded that since the end of the 1980s, CVT in many member states and at the EU level 'has increasingly become a central focus of social dialogue.' Moreover, since 2000 'trade unions and workforce representatives are going beyond strategic discussions and becoming increasingly involved in the practical implementation of further training.' These trends are endorsed by the CEDEFOP survey, which shows that in addition to their role in the formal structures of VET policy making, the social partners are involved in all countries in various activities concerned with the implementation of VET actions, particularly at sector and local levels. In particular, the social partners are involved in developing curricula and new qualifications as well as developing on-the-job training.

While the structures of participation vary according to the degree of state regulation, social partner involvement in developing curricula and qualifications is extensive irrespective of the nature of the regulatory framework. In Germany, there are national 'minimum' curricula for VET, but companies are free to go beyond these and large companies frequently do so, creating additional qualifications to meet their own needs and supplementing national qualifications. In France, the social partners can propose new curricula and qualifications under the auspices of the joint advisory boards, the various higher education commissions and the sectoral Joint National Employment Boards (CPNEs, *Commissions paritaire nationale de l'emploi*). In Denmark, the Minister of Education determines the guidelines for each VET programme based on the recommendations of the social partners. The social partners exert a direct influence in laying down the curricular 'framework' for VET programmes via the Advisory Council on VET (*Erhvervsuddannelsesrådet*), the National Trade Committees (*Faglige udvalg*), the National Training Council (*Uddannelsesrådet for arbejdsmarkedsuddannelserne*) and the CVT Committees (*Efteruddannelsesudvalg*). Via Local Training Committees (*Lokale uddannelsesudvalg*), the social partners are able to 'colour' the local curriculum according to local labour market needs. Equally in Finland the social partners are consulted in the elaboration of the national core curricula and as members of the Training Committees they have a further opportunity to influence curriculum content. In Austria, the social partners have an extensive role in implementation of VET and are responsible for maintaining the adult education schools (*Fachhochschulen*) which are virtually the only providers of continuing vocational training. In each of these respects they are either consulted on, or responsible for (in the case of the *Fachhochschulen*), curriculum design and the development of new qualifications. In Denmark, local training committees, which include social partner representatives, act as advisory bodies to vocational schools on adapting curricula to the needs of local enterprises. In the UK, the unions have also been involved in developing new qualifications under the competence-based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs in England and Wales, Scottish Vocational Qualifications, SVQs, in Scotland). Occupational standards for qualifications were developed through functional analysis organised by employer-led Industry Lead Bodies, a role subsequently taken over by Standards Setting Bodies, and social partner involvement is essential in this.

The social partners' involvement in developing on-the-job training varies with the form of regulation. In the more regulated states, there is a legal right to be involved, whereas in countries with more voluntarist traditions, practice varies substantially between individual employers. In Germany, the social partners are typically involved at company level in selecting trainees and training content. Works Councils in companies with more than 5 employees can request that the employer undertakes a Training Needs Analysis. While the social partners in Belgium and France have a similar role in defining curricula, they are not involved in recruitment of trainees. In Finland, the social partners are involved in recruitment in sector VET institutions, but otherwise the national student selection system proposes students to the institutions, who have the final say on selection. In the UK, even under the Conservatives (1979-97) when the overall scope of collective bargaining contracted significantly, there was social dialogue over VET at both enterprise and workplace levels, although evidence suggests that the unions had only limited success in attempting to extend the bargaining agenda to VET issues (Claydon & Green 1992; TUC 1998), although where they did, unions had a positive influence on training at workplace level (Claydon & Green 1992; Green, Machin & Wilkinson 1995; Heyes & Stuart 1998; TUC 1995; Winterton & Winterton 1994). In several countries, VET arrangements have become more decentralised since the 1990s, making VET, and especially CVT, more responsive to the transformation of industry and involving the social partners in practical implementation activities. In Sweden, the municipalities gained a large degree of freedom to organise IVT at the upper secondary level, via local vocational councils with employer and employee representatives. CVT in Norway is largely developed at company level with the involvement of the local social partners in determining training curricula and, in some cases co-financing of training. In France, the VET system has become progressively more decentralised through legal changes: Law 83-8 of 7 January 1983; Quinquennial Law No. 93-1313 of 20 December 1993; and the Labour Code, Article L. 910-1. Under the regional vocational training development scheme, regional employment and vocational training coordination committees consult the regional social partners.

Social partner involvement in initiatives to promote lifelong learning and encourage the take-up of learning opportunities

The social partners are widely involved in initiatives to promote lifelong learning and to encourage learning at work. For example, the Dutch Government and the social partners agreed to develop a national lifelong learning strategy, with the target for 2010 to increase the participation rate in vocational education of the population aged between 25 and 64 to the level of the two best performing Member States of the EU. Vocational education institutes will be developed into knowledge centres for lifelong learning, for which the social partners have a joint responsibility. The tripartite Advisory Committee on Education and the Labour Market (ACOA) is one of the bodies involved in redesigning the Dutch qualification structure to facilitate lifelong learning. Since the 1980s the number of collective agreements on education and training has increased substantially and research by Labour Inspection (*Najaarsrapportage CAO-afspraken*, 2001) showed that agreements on employability were included in 86 out of the 117 agreements reviewed.

In many countries, the social partners are involved in establishing arrangements for funding of VET and promoting access to learning. Levy-grant arrangements are a common means of financing VET and the social partners are involved in so far as employers make contributions to funds via the levy and claim grants in relation to training. In some countries, employers' associations have a role in administering the system and on occasion the unions are also involved. In Germany, the social partners decide (through tripartite arrangements) on the funding of training schemes, including apprenticeships, run by the Employment Service at national, regional and local level. In France the social partners may be involved in administering apprenticeship tax (collection and allocation at the discretion of the enterprises) and establish collection agencies for the mandatory corporate financial contribution which finances training for young people benefiting from alternance work contracts. In Denmark, IVT is funded via the Employers' Reimbursement Scheme (*Arbejdsgivernes Elevrefusion – AER*), while CVT is funded through the Labour Market Institution of Financing of Education and Training (*Arbejdsmarkedssuddannelsernes finansieringsfond*).

Heidemann (2002) commented that in recent years many countries have introduced individual learning accounts (as in the UK and Sweden) or training vouchers (as in Austria and Germany) both to encourage up-take of learning opportunities and to share the costs of learning. In the UK, individual learning accounts (which were closed down in November 2001 following allegations of fraud) became a focus of social dialogue as employers made additional contributions (over and above the state finance) on the basis of individual or collective agreements. In Germany, there are collective agreements in many sectors concerning continuing VET funding and programmes and Works Councils often make proposals for paid leave (*Bildungsurlaub*) to undertake continuing VET. In some large companies, the social partners have negotiated agreements on learning time accounts (*Lernzeitkonten*). There is a new collective agreement for qualification (*Tarifvertrag zur Qualifizierung*) in the metal industry of Baden-Württemberg: every employee is entitled to regular updating of skills based on individual personnel development discussions. In Belgium, the social partners recently concluded some important agreements. The *Collective work agreement* of 25 April 2001 concluded by the CPNAE social partners for 2001-2002, included a training section, valid until the end of 2003, under which employers must grant all employees at least four days of training during the CCT period, two days in 2002 and two in 2003. To achieve this objective, each enterprise could join the CCT by submitting a training plan to the relevant sectoral social fund by 31 March 2002. As well as the benefits of expanding or updating employee skills, subscribing to the agreement brought significant financial advantages: training subsidies of €37.18 per day per employee for companies that train their workers (except for free CEFORA courses), onsite CEFORA courses and price reductions in more than 120 recognised training institutions. Under the *Inter-occupational Agreement* of 22 December 2000, valid from 1 January 2001 to 31 December 2002, the social partners asked the various sectors to launch at least one new collective work agreement or extend an existing one and maintain contributions of 0.1 per cent in 2001 and 2002 for training and employment of groups at risk, and to continue to comply with 1999-2000 terms and conditions, with the option of an exemption in the case of first jobs. They called on sectors to implement initiatives to determine the most productive synergies and to strive for optimal definition of target groups, including older workers, non-Belgian ethnic groups and the disabled.

The role of collective agreements in promoting VET at local level is emphasised in several countries, irrespective of the degree of state regulation of VET. In Spain, the Third Tripartite Continuing Training Agreement, signed in December 2000, defined the conditions under which companies could obtain government support for implementing CVT in the enterprise, one provision requiring that the training plan is approved by the legal representatives of the workers in the company. In Portugal, integrated training plans are developed from the training plans of individual companies, which are presented to the public authorities for funding. In some cases workers or their representatives are involved in defining the training plan, with a negotiated collective agreement. In Iceland, the social partners are involved in CVT at company level, where curricula and new qualifications are developed

without necessarily adhering to national standards. In some sectors the employers and employees pay a proportion of wages into a fund for this purpose. In Austria, with a highly regulated VET system, enterprises are free to introduce training schemes without reference to national standards and company level collective agreements are sometimes concluded in relation to training plans. In France, local training schemes are required to adhere to national standards where national qualifications are involved, but companies organise additional CVT without qualifications and works councils are consulted on such training schemes. Industry level collective agreements in the Netherlands have established training levies in some 60 sectors, designed to harmonise training costs and reduce poaching of skilled labour.

Arguably the most important social partner led innovation focused on increasing the take-up of learning opportunities, has come out of the UK, where statutory support for social dialogue is absent. Recognising serious skills gaps and shortages in the economy, the Labour Government established the *Union Learning Fund* (ULF) in 1998, with the aim of using trade union influence to increase the take-up of learning at work, while boosting union capacity for delivering learning among trade unionists. Much ULF activity was centred on Union Learning Representatives, active union members, normally lay officials, who provide advice, guidance and support to colleagues in activities related to learning and may negotiate with employers or providers to increase access to learning opportunities. Early evidence suggested that Union Learning Representatives were having a very positive impact on the creation and take-up of learning at work (Cowen, Clements & Cutter 2000) and the statutory backing that was introduced by the *Employment Act 2002* is of pivotal importance for improving trade union effectiveness in influencing VET and lifelong learning opportunities in the workplace (Rodgers, Wallis & Winterton 2003).

Conclusions

State regulation and a long-term focus on VET appear conducive to effective social dialogue, but these conditions alone are insufficient since the French system shares these characteristics with Germany. The key differences between Germany and France are that the French system is school-led and the trade unions are weakly organised at local level, which militates against meaningful dialogue at local level, as it does also in Italy, where the situation is exacerbated by a market-led system with little effective state regulation. The UK system of VET, despite also being market-led and of short-term focus, is grounded in the workplace, making it conducive to social dialogue where there is sufficient strength of trade union organisation, even though until very recently there was no statutory guarantee of trade union involvement at local level. The CEDEFOP survey demonstrates that social dialogue and other social partner involvement, such as in tripartite bodies, is extensive and apparent at all levels in VET policy and implementation in Europe: national, regional, sectoral and local (variously including enterprise, establishment and sub-regional geographical area). Significantly, the social partners are involved irrespective of whether the prevailing socio-economic model involves legal regulation (as in the majority of countries), voluntary arrangements (as in the UK) or a hybrid of these as in the formalised cooperation found in Finland and the Netherlands. The locus of VET merely affects the nature of social partner involvement.

The CEDEFOP survey demonstrates that the social partners have a formal role in VET policy making in all the European countries covered by the survey (11 of the EU15 member states and 2 EFTA countries). In all cases this role includes representation at national level; in the majority of cases also at sectoral level; and in many cases also at regional and local (enterprise or establishment) level. In those countries with a tradition of state regulation, social partner representation is determined by legislation, as is the case in 9 of the countries involved in the survey. In countries with a tradition of voluntarism, notably the UK and Ireland, historically the law has been much less prescriptive concerning social partner involvement in VET policy. Nevertheless, in both countries the social partners play a major role in developing VET policy. Irrespective of the degree of state regulation, in all countries the social partners are widely involved in initiatives to promote lifelong learning and to encourage learning at work. In many countries, the social partners are involved in establishing arrangements for funding of VET and promoting access to learning.

The CEDEFOP survey shows that in addition to their role in the formal structures of VET policy making, the social partners are involved in all countries in various activities concerned with the implementation of VET actions, particularly at sector and local levels. For example, the social partners are involved in developing curricula and new qualifications, developing on-the-job training and in encouraging the take-up of learning opportunities. While the structures of participation vary according to the degree of state regulation, social partner involvement in developing curricula and qualifications is extensive irrespective of the nature of the regulatory framework. The social partners' involvement in VET implementation at company level varies with the form of regulation. In the more regulated states, there is a legal right to be involved, whereas in countries with more voluntarist traditions, practice varies substantially between individual employers. In several countries, VET arrangements have become more

decentralised since the 1990s, making VET, and especially CVT, more responsive to the transformation of industry and involving the social partners in practical implementation activities. In recent years many countries have introduced individual learning accounts (as in the UK and Sweden) or training vouchers (as in Austria and Germany) both to encourage up-take of learning opportunities and to share the costs of learning. The role of collective agreements in promoting VET at local level is emphasised in several countries, irrespective of the degree of state regulation of VET. The differences between the countries appear to be less than might be anticipated from the different forms of VET regulation (market versus state) and stereotypical models of labour relations (Northern or Scandinavian model, Southern or Mediterranean model, Western or Anglophone model and the Central or German model). The CEDEFOP survey suggests similarities that cross the labour relations typologies as well as differences within them, which may be the result of convergence occurring with transfer of good practice (or may equally reflect the limitations of the traditional typologies).

The necessity for such dialogue to take place at enterprise and establishment level, as well as at the European level, is clear from the nature of the changes outlined above. As Kerckhofs & André (2003: 133) note:

The development of a coherent European policy framework to stimulate investment in lifelong learning by workers and companies for the benefit of all can be successful only on a basis of social dialogue. Social partners at all levels jointly hold a share of the responsibility for mobilising the motivation and resources to develop the human capital of companies.

The *Framework of Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competencies and Qualifications*, agreed by the social partners as a contribution to the Lisbon strategy, is likely to increase the role of social dialogue in promoting VET and lifelong learning, especially in relation to the development of curricula and qualifications; the provision of information advice and guidance; and evaluating the impact on both companies and workers (Vind *et al* 2004). It is particularly significant that the social partners are producing annual reports on progress in the priority areas identified and that the social dialogue ad hoc group on education and training will undertake an evaluation after three years in March 2006.

Contribution to new knowledge in HRD

Since the research was designed to meet the specification of CEDEFOP, which in turn reflected the agenda of the European Commission and the social partners, the objective was to inform policy and improve practice. The conceptual and theoretical contribution has been in establishing the importance of the role of social dialogue in HRD in Europe; indeed this link with the European social model is perhaps the defining characteristic of HRD in Europe as distinct from other parts of the world. In methodological terms, the contribution has been modest, demonstrating the limitations of an official survey and the need to reach beyond formal networks to engage those most directly involved. The major contribution, in line with the needs of the Commission and CEDEFOP, has been in establishing substantive new empirical knowledge. Specifically, we now have a more comprehensive overview of the nature and scale of social partner involvement in VET and a baseline from which to monitor developments in line with the social partners' *Framework of Actions*. This will be the focus of continued research, in collaboration with the social partners, over coming years.

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